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Pilgrim's Scrip

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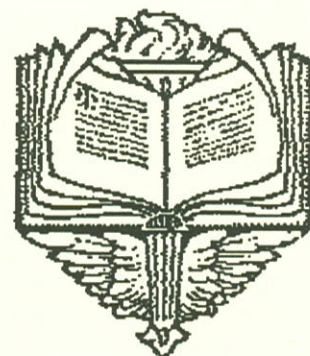
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The Pilgrim's Scrip

A MENTORING WE WILL GO



[I want you all to know that the Pilgrim is NOT Katina Strauch! The Pilgrim is a noteworthy type of high esteem in librarydom who loves to give opinions! Maybe some of you are the same. Here's proof that you can be anonymous. Have something to get off your chest??]

There are those among us, apparently in great numbers, who believe that professional mentoring can be accomplished much as computerized dating services are run. There are also those who believe that morality can be legislated.

Where did the interest in organized mentoring come from? Are we trying to fill a need that is not there or is there a need and we are trying to fill it in an unnatural way? Are we trying to legislate morality and commit an unnatural act at the same time? Let us try to reconstruct what happened. Someone, probably an academic librarian needing to publish (perish the thought) and wanting to look

scientific or social scientific, more likely. This ambitious soul found something in the social sciences about mentors and proteges. Why not write something about mentors and proteges in librarianship? Or perhaps someone was mentioned in an article and was associated with someone else as a protege or mentor. You get the picture.

Now interviewing people about how they got their starts in the profession is one thing and we can learn from that. We probably need to give more credit to those from whom we learn than we do. Each of us can probably recall at least one teacher from grade school or high school or college who really made a difference in our lives. If we have been librarians more than a year or so, we can probably think of a colleague who influenced us directly or indirectly and who helped us become better librarians. Of course there are those who might have had the opposite effect and driven some from librarianship but we can assume that those of little faith are not reading these words.

If you are lucky, you will begin to work in a place where a senior librarian will see something in you and will cultivate your common interest in librarianship. Perhaps

this person will suggest some of the folkways and mores of your library. Whether you ultimately agree or not is immaterial, you have at least been made to think of such things and decide for yourself.

This senior librarian (age does not necessarily determine seniority) might also suggest some readings or encourage membership in local or state library associations and probably a division or two within ALA. If you are smart, you will listen and question and appreciate the advice or appreciate the attempt to share some experiences with you.

You might have questions for this person and you might want to talk about your job and your aspirations. When things are not going well, you might seek advice about your situation or you might just want to blow off steam with someone with a neutral position or a not so neutral position. You might find that you share a common enemy.

What about another scenario? You decide that you are getting nowhere. Who can help you get on that ALA committee? Who can help you get started on an article or just discuss some professional issues that concern you? Perhaps

you are in a small library and have little contact with colleagues outside of normal business routines? How do you get the nourishment you need? In California you could sign up for a mentor.

The mentoring program within the California Library Association is too new to judge whether it will be a success but a careful observer of human nature can make some guesses.

The need is probably there just as a need is present when someone agrees to a blind date. Sometimes a blind date is just what you were looking for and if you are lucky, there is a mutual attraction. The same thing can happen from digital or analog matching of self-selected mentors and proteges. But that is not how it works in real life.

The mentor/protege relationship described above is probably more like a friendship and we ought to consider it a friendship. There is that mentor/protege relationship but that can also exist outside friendship.

Think of a mentor as a teacher. For this relationship to be productive, there needs to be continuity. Hearing a stirring speech or reading an exciting book or article might give you some ideas and lead you to great things but can you consider the speaker or writer as a mentor? I would say no.

On the other hand, there might be a library director, assistant director, department head, a colleague in

another department, or someone you serve with in an association. This person teaches by example and you learn to respect the person. In ALA, for example, I learned from many people, most of whom I got to know on a first name basis, some of whom I have become friends with. Some are no longer active in the profession but I remember them and their spirits and I consider them mentors. They would not consider me a protege. In some instances, I just might qualify. Certainly there are book jobbers from whom I learned much and to whom I owe much. They were active teachers as they travelled from library to library and I would like to think that they had their proteges within their companies and within their territories. The names Jim Cameron, Fred Gullette, and Don Coombs come readily to mind.

There are colleagues, too, from whom I have learned much. Most are still active, others have long since retired and I have not seen them for years. Occasionally I am reminded of them when I see their names in bibliographies or footnotes or tables of contents or when I think back on whose company I have most enjoyed at conferences.

Not a one of those people would have thought of offering their services as mentors nor did it occur to me to ask if I could be their protege. Mentors and proteges who become friends are matched in heaven, if you will, not by a computer or by wishing it so, just as friendships are made. Sometimes, too, there is some work involved. We can't just move in with someone

as Ramblin' Jack Elliot moved in with Woody Guthrie, but we can work at relationships. We cannot force them and we must not be too direct. The best way to find mentors and proteges is to love one's work, work hard at what one loves, and to be active in one's profession. You will find, as John Stuart Mill found happiness, that we find what we are seeking when we least expect it.

Mentor programs are artificial devices and are a reflection of the American expectation of a quick fix, instant gratification. The mentor/protege relationship that is also an intimate friendship is not so common. When one develops, you will know it. Good teacher/colleagues are common but invaluable nonetheless. Take advantage of them, both sides, and enjoy them. And even as you learn, you become a teacher and the cycle continues. We overanalyze, we oversimplify, we overuse good words until they become parodies of the meanings they once had. Let's not be mentors, let's not be proteges, let's be friends and colleagues who learn from one another. Amen. ♣

